

US begins offering 1B free COVID tests, but many more needed

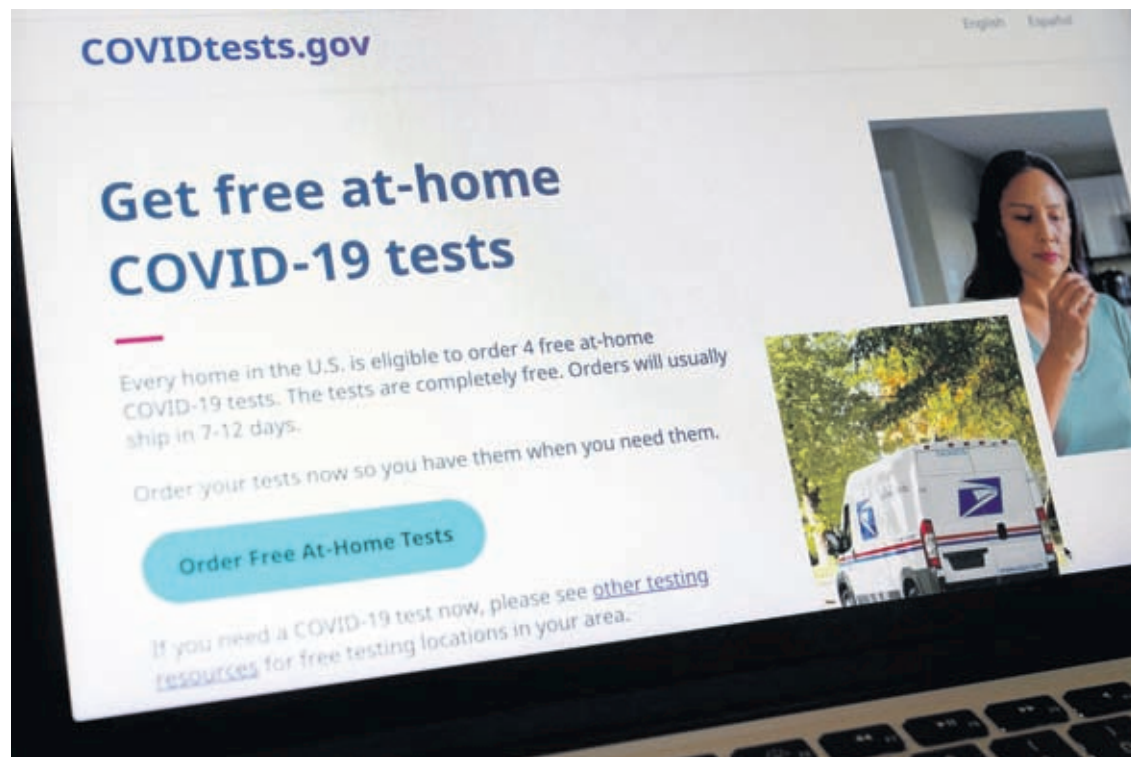
WASHINGTON (AP) — For the first time, people across the U.S. can log on to a government website and order free, at-home COVID-19 tests. But the White House push may do little to ease the omicron surge, and experts say Washington will have to do a lot more to fix the country's long-troubled testing system.

The website, COVIDTests.gov, allows people to order four at-home tests per household, regardless of citizenship status, and have them delivered by mail. But the tests won't arrive for seven to 12 days, after omicron cases are expected to peak in many parts of the country.

The White House also announced Wednesday that it will begin making 400 million N95 masks available

for free at pharmacies and community health centers. Both initiatives represent the kind of mass government investments long seen in parts of Europe and Asia, but delayed in the U.S. Experts say the plan to distribute 1 billion tests is a good first step, but it must become a regular part of the pandemic response. In the same way that it has made vaccines free and plentiful, the government must use its purchasing power to assure a steady test supply, they say.

"The playbook for rapid tests should look exactly like the playbook for vaccines," said Zoe McLaren, a health economist at the University Maryland. "They're both things that help keep cases down and help keep COVID under control."



A home test two-pack commonly sells for more than \$20 at the store — if you can find one, amid the

omicron-triggered rush to get tested. Since last week, insurance companies have been required to cover the

cost of up to eight at-home rapid tests bought at drug-stores or online retailers.

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The government website's limit of four tests may not go very far in some households.

Kristen Keymont, 30, is a voice and piano teacher who teaches online and shares a house in Ipswich, Massachusetts, with her partner and two other people. When one of her housemates tested positive just before Christmas, she and her partner spent \$275 buying more than a dozen tests.

"One test each is nice, I guess," she said. "I'm glad we have them, but we're still going to need to buy more if one of us gets exposed."

It would be better, she said, if requests were linked to each person rather than each residential address.

Also, some people who live in buildings with multiple units had their requests for tests rejected, with the website saying tests had already been ordered for

that address. As those complaints surfaced on social media, people began sharing advice on how to enter apartment or unit numbers in a way that the website would accept them.

The U.S. bungled its initial rollout of government-made COVID-19 tests in the early days of the outbreak and has never really gotten back on track. While private companies are now producing more than 250 million at-home tests per month, that is still not enough to allow most Americans to frequently test themselves.

The Biden administration focused most of its early COVID-19 efforts on rolling out vaccines. As infections fell last spring, demand for testing plummeted and many manufacturers began shutting down plants. Only in September — after the delta surge was in full swing — did the Biden administration announce its first federal contracts de-

signed to jump-start home test production.

Countries like Britain and Germany purchased and distributed billions of the tests soon after they became available last year.

"If you leave the manufacturers to their own devices, they're just going to respond to what's happening right now," said Dr. Amy Karger, a testing specialist at the University of Minnesota Medical School. "And then there's not a lot of bandwidth if something surprising happens, as it did with omicron." Even with government intervention, the U.S. faces a massive testing load because of its population, which is five times larger than Britain's.

The U.S. would need 2.3 billion tests per month for all teens and adults to test themselves twice per week. That's more than double the number of at-home tests the administration plans to distribute over several months.

Dr. David Michaels, a former member of President Joe Biden's COVID-19 advisory board, said the administration will probably need to request more federal money to fund testing for years to come.

"Congress was willing to put trillions of dollars into infrastructure primarily to improve transportation. This is infrastructure," said Michaels, a public health professor at George Washington University. "We need billions more in testing to save lives and maintain the economy."

For now, testing will probably continue to be strained. And even the most bullish proponents say the U.S. will have to carefully weigh where home tests can have the greatest benefit — for instance, by dispensing them to those most vulnerable to the virus.

"The fact is we just don't have that kind of mass testing capacity in the U.S.," said Dr. Michael Mina, chief

science officer for home testing service eMed, who once called for using billions of tests per month to crush the pandemic. "We should now be thinking about how to use these tests in a strategic way. We don't want to just dilute them out across the population." Mina was until recently a professor at Harvard and has informally advised federal officials on testing.

Mina and others acknowledge widespread use of rapid tests is not without its downsides. Results from at-home tests are seldom reported to health authorities, giving an imperfect picture of the spread and size of the pandemic.

More than 2 million test results a day are being reported to U.S. health officials, but nearly all of them come from laboratory-processed tests. Some researchers estimate the real number of daily tests is roughly 5 million, when accounting for at-home ones. □

Prior infection, vaccines provide best protection from COVID

By **MIKE STOBBE** **Associated Press**

NEW YORK (AP) — A new study in two states that compares coronavirus protection from prior infection and vaccination concludes getting the shots is still the safest way to prevent COVID-19.

The study examined infections in New York and California last summer and fall and found people who were both vaccinated and had survived a prior bout of COVID-19 had the most protection.

But unvaccinated people with a prior infection were a close second. By fall, when the more contagious delta variant had taken over but boosters weren't yet widespread, those people had lower diagnoses than vaccinated

people who had no past infection.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which released the study Wednesday, noted several caveats to the research. And some outside experts were cautious of the findings and wary of how they might be interpreted.

"The bottom line message is that from symptomatic COVID infection you do generate some immunity," said immunologist E. John Wherry of the University of Pennsylvania. "But it's still much safer to get your immunity from vaccination than from infection."

Vaccination has long been urged even after a prior case of COVID-19 because both kinds of protection eventually wane — and there are too many

unknowns to rely only on a past infection, especially a long-ago one, added immunologist Ali Ellebedy at Washington University in St. Louis. "There are so many variables you cannot control that you just cannot use it as a way to say, 'Oh, I'm infected then I am protected,'" Ellebedy said.

The research does fall in line with a small cluster of studies that found unvaccinated people with a previous infection had lower risks of COVID diagnosis or illness than vaccinated people who were never before infected.

The findings do seem plausible, said Christine Petersen, a University of Iowa epidemiologist. She said a vaccine developed against an earlier form of

the coronavirus is likely to become less and less effective against newer, mutated versions.

However, she and other experts said, there are a number of possible other factors at play, including whether the vaccine's effectiveness simply faded over time in many people and to what extent mask wearing and other behaviors played a part in what happened.

CDC officials noted the study was done before the omicron variant took over and before many Americans received booster doses, and so it's not clear what impact boosters might have. The analysis also did not address the risk of severe illness or death from COVID-19.

The study authors concluded vaccination "remains the safest strategy" to prevent infections and "all eligible persons should be up to date with COVID-19 vaccination."

The researchers looked at infections in California and New York, which together account for about 18% of the U.S. population. They

also looked at COVID-19 hospitalizations in California.

Overall, about 70% of the adults in each state were vaccinated; another 5% were vaccinated and had a previous infection. A little under 20% weren't vaccinated; and roughly 5% were unvaccinated but had a past infection.

The researchers looked at COVID-19 cases from the end of last May until mid-November, and calculated how often new infections happened in each group.

Compared with unvaccinated people who hadn't been diagnosed with COVID-19, case rates were:

— 6-fold lower in California and 4.5-fold lower in New York in those who were vaccinated but not previously infected.

— 29-fold lower in California and 15-fold lower in New York those who had been infected but never vaccinated.

— 32.5-fold lower in California and 20-fold lower in New York in those who had been infected and vaccinated. □



3 cops face complex federal trial in George Floyd's death

By AMY FORLITI

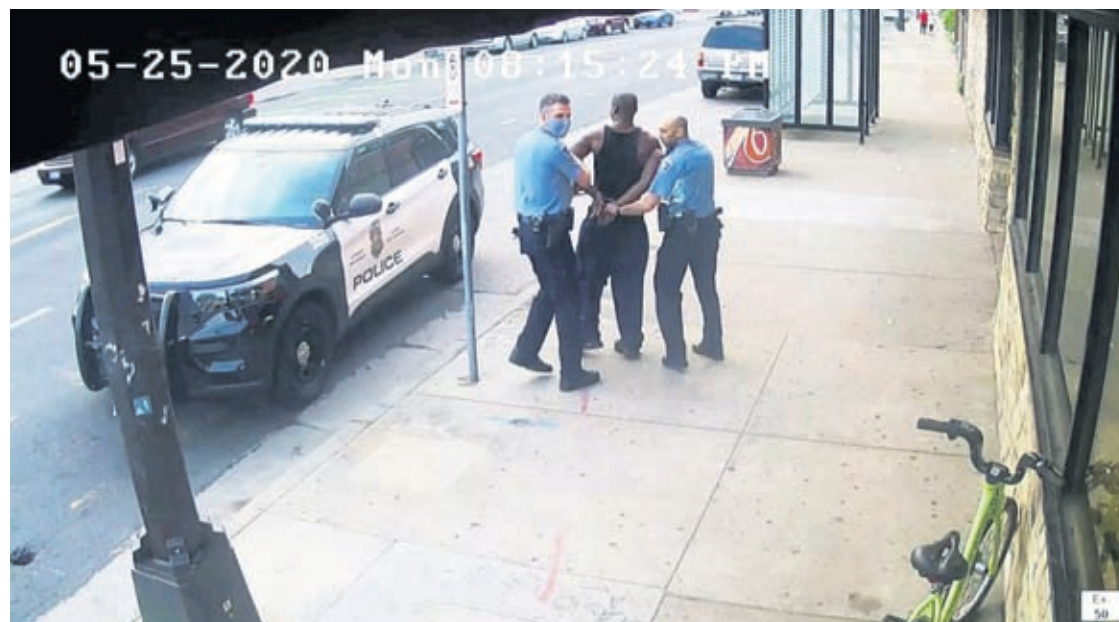
Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The federal trial for three former Minneapolis police officers who were with Derek Chauvin when he pinned George Floyd to the street is expected to be complex as prosecutors try to prove each officer willingly violated the Black man's constitutional rights.

Jury selection begins Thursday in the federal case against J. Kueng, Thomas Lane and Tou Thao, who also face a state trial later this year on counts of aiding and abetting both murder and manslaughter in Floyd's death.

In the federal case, all three are broadly charged with depriving Floyd of his civil rights while acting under "color of law," or government authority. Legal experts say it will be more complicated than the state trial because prosecutors have the difficult task of proving they willfully violated Floyd's constitutional rights — unreasonably seizing him and depriving him of liberty without due process.

"In the state case, they're charged with what they did. That they aided and abetted Chauvin in some way. In the federal case, they're charged with what they didn't do — and that's an important distinction. It's



a different kind of accountability," said Mark Osler, a former federal prosecutor and professor at the University of St. Thomas School of Law.

While the state would try to prove the officers helped Chauvin commit murder or manslaughter, federal prosecutors must show that they failed to intervene. As Phil Turner, another former federal prosecutor, put it, prosecutors must show the officers should have done something to stop Chauvin, rather than show they did something directly to Floyd. Floyd, 46, died on May 25, 2020, after Chauvin pinned him to the ground with his knee on Floyd's neck for 9 1/2 minutes while Floyd was facedown, handcuffed and gasping for air. Kueng knelt on Floyd's back and

Lane held down his legs. Thao kept bystanders from intervening.

Chauvin was convicted in April on state charges of murder and manslaughter and is serving a 22½-year sentence. In December, he pleaded guilty to a federal count of violating Floyd's rights.

Federal prosecutions of officers involved in on-duty killings are rare. Prosecutors face a high legal standard to show that an officer willfully deprived someone of their constitutional rights, including the right to be free from unreasonable seizures or the use of unreasonable force; an accident, bad judgment or negligence isn't enough to support federal charges.

Essentially, prosecutors must prove that the officers

knew what they were doing was wrong, but did it anyway.

Kueng, Lane and Thao are all charged with willfully depriving Floyd of the right to be free from an officer's deliberate indifference to his medical needs. The indictment says the three men saw Floyd clearly needed medical care and failed to aid him.

Thao and Kueng are also charged with a second count alleging they willfully violated Floyd's right to be free from unreasonable seizure by not stopping Chauvin as he knelt on Floyd's neck. It's not clear why Lane is not mentioned in that count, but evidence shows he asked twice whether Floyd should be rolled on his side.

Both counts allege the of-

ficers' actions resulted in Floyd's death.

Federal civil rights violations that result in death are punishable by up to life in prison or even death, but those stiff sentences are extremely rare and federal sentencing guidelines rely on complicated formulas that indicate the officers would get much less if convicted.

John Baker, a former defense attorney and professor at St. Cloud State University, said each officer has good defense arguments available. Baker said Chauvin was a senior officer and Lane and Kueng, who were new to the job, can argue they were doing what they were told to do. Baker said Thao can say he was just trying to keep other people from getting involved.

"The question is: Did they do enough and should they have stopped Derek Chauvin from doing what he was doing?" Baker said. It's not known whether any of the three officers will testify. Baker said he would advise them not to, because their testimony could be used against them in a state trial. But Osler thinks at least some of them might take the stand, saying police officers make some of the best witnesses because they are trained on how to testify. □

1st for Louisiana: Drug-resistant fungus found at hospital

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A hospital in New Orleans says it has identified two patients infected with a rare, drug-resistant fungus — the first time it's been found in Louisiana.

Candida auris has already been found in Washington, D.C., and at least 20 other states including Georgia, Florida and Texas, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The fungus is a harmful form of yeast that can be resistant to the most common antifungal drugs.

The CDC considers it an emerging global threat and says it is especially

dangerous to hospital and nursing home patients with serious medical problems. Although the patients at University Medical Center are the first known in Louisiana, other undetected cases are likely, Dr. Nirav Patel, chief medical officer told The Times-Picayune / The New Orleans Advocate.

"This bug could have been here in Louisiana for quite some time," he said, noting outbreaks in Florida, where 135 cases have been reported, and Texas, with 30. More than 1,100 cases had been diagnosed nationwide as of Aug. 21, according to the CDC. California

had reported 245 cases, Illinois 243, New York 235, and New Jersey 70.

The CDC says people apparently most at risk are those who have been in a health care facility a long time and have a line or tube into the body, such as a breathing tube, feeding tube or central venous catheter.

It can cause infections in the bloodstream or in wounds.

The hospital, citing patient privacy, did not answer the newspaper's questions about whether its infected patients had recently been transferred from other health care centers, when

the infections were identified or whether the patients had a history of international travel.

But it's likely more cases will follow, said Dr. Alfred Luk, medical director of transplant infectious diseases at Tulane University School of Medicine.

"I know everyone is exhausted from alarmist news, but I'm really concerned about it," Luk said. "Usually when we find this ... I equate it to the tip of the iceberg."

The fungus can spread easily in settings such as nursing homes and hospitals because it can survive on skin and other surfaces. It's likely been brewing on surfaces

and people for some time, Luk said.

Health experts said the risk is low for healthy patients but those who are immunocompromised can face severe complications. It has killed 30% to 60% of infected people, but many of them "had other serious illnesses that also increased their risk of death," according to the CDC website.

The yeast was first identified in a Japanese patient's ear infection in 2009, and was given the species name auris, meaning "ear." In 2016, the U.S. announced 13 known cases within the country, the first dating from 2013. □

Colorado coal town grapples with future as plant shuts down

By **PATTY NIEBERG** Associated Press/Report for America

CRAIG, Colorado (AP) — In a quiet valley tucked away from Colorado's bustling ski resorts, far from his hometown in northern Mexico, Trinidad Loya found a way to support his family's American dream: Coal.

He, his son and grandson — all named Trinidad Loya — worked for the coal plant in Craig, Colorado, with the eldest Loya starting more than 30 years ago. The plant currently employs 180 people, paying higher salaries and bringing far more job security than most other jobs in the area.

But that's all about to change.

The coal plant is closing, along with the mine that feeds it and has nearly 115 more employees, and all the workers will lose their jobs over the next decade, according to Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association Inc. which partially owns and operates the Craig Station.

That will mean a tough transition for the Loyas and other workers who've made a life in Craig, a rural town with a population 9,000 that draws elk hunters from around the world to its scenic surroundings.

"A power plant job, especially in a rural community like Craig — those are what I call cradle to grave jobs," said Richard Meisinger, business manager of the 111 chapter of International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers union which represents the bargaining unit at the Craig plant and nearly 4,200 members across Colorado and Wyoming. "People hire on there when they're young anticipating that they are going to work at that power plant there their entire workable lifespan."

The same scenario is playing out in other small towns across the U.S. After decades of relying on coal for their workforce, tax base and way of life, the towns face uncertain futures as new state and national legislation forces the retirement of fossil fuels because



of the worsening effects of human-caused climate change. Only a few towns have a viable plan to transition to cleaner energy, like one in Wyoming chosen for a Bill Gates-backed nuclear power plant.

The impact spreads beyond the plants workers and is felt by the rest of the community, too. In Craig, much of the infrastructure of the county is supported by the coal plant workers, who make an average of \$100,000 a year, compared with a \$40,000 average salary across the county.

Now, some workers will retire, while others, like the younger Loyas, must find a new way to support their families, and possibly leave Craig behind.

On Monday, the youngest Loya, started an apprenticeship position at another Tri-State owned facility across the state in Pueblo — some 300 miles (483 kilometers) away from Craig where he lives with his wife and two children, ages 7 and 3. When he's not working as a sub-station technician there, he plans on making the five-hour drive to come home and see his family. He took a pay cut for the position.

He's holding out hope a job opens at the Craig plant due to job movement within the plant. In the meantime, he'll stay with a sister in Pueblo and hope for the best.

"It felt right to our family at

the time," Loya said.

— Craig sits in the heart of Colorado's western front, only 40 miles (64 kilometers) from the popular Steamboat Springs ski area.

Cows and lambs graze on farmlands. Creeks stream out of the nearby rivers. Deer traverse downtown Craig at night, munching on grass and curiously peeking around closed storefronts and offices. The rural escape is why many of those who grow up in Craig choose to stay.

In winter months, the town, known as the elk hunting capital of the world, houses thousands of hunter groups donned in camouflage and bright orange who come to the area in search of game. Tens of thousands of hunters stay in the town's hotels and frequent the local restaurants. According to a Colorado Parks and Wildlife report, the hunting industry brought \$136 million to northwest Colorado in 2017.

Moffat County is made up of millions of acres of public lands, and its mineral deposits of high-volatility and low-sulfur coal brought the industry to town and sustained families for decades.

The town has reinvented itself before.

What was once a last stop on the Denver and Salt Lake Railway which allowed for nationwide agricultural exports like wool,

soon the area became a money-maker for the oil industry and then a source of uranium. The oil fields and uranium mills left Craig by the 1960s as demands changed, but by the 1970s, coal was king in Colorado with companies buying up mines and others like Colorado-Ute Electric Association purchasing lands to build a power plant. This would eventually become the Craig Station.

Now, the town is changing again.

The owners of the Craig Station decided to close the 1,285-megawatt, three-unit plant over a ten-year period. Unit 1 and 2, owned by PacifiCorp, Platte River Power Authority, Salt River Project, Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association and Xcel Energy, are set to close in 2025 and 2028. Unit 3, solely owned by Tri-State, will retire by 2030. As the coal industry goes, so will nearly half of Moffat County's gross domestic product, Peterson said. It could affect services like healthcare, fire departments, infrastructure and upkeep for neighborhoods and roadways.

According to Ray Beck, former Moffat County commissioner and mayor of Craig, the county's biggest source of revenue is property tax. Moffat County's 2020 assessed value was nearly \$430 million with 62% coming from the top 10 taxpayers, all energy-relat-

ed businesses.

"We can't recover from that," Beck said.

A scenario put together by the Moffat County assessor found that the economic situation would only get worse as the plant's three units shut down over time. According to the forecast, in 10 years when the entire powerplant shuts down, it would take 65 Super Walgreens and 93 Hampton Inns to replace the assessed value, Beck said.

The loss of coal jobs in a community like Craig also will hurt small businesses whose customers are primarily coal workers and have disposable income, said Jennifer Holloway, executive director of the Craig Chamber of Commerce.

That's bad news for Gino's Pizzeria, the West Twin Cinema and Thunder Rolls Bowling Center.

When discussions about the end of coal began, many in the town were in denial and some thought the decision would waver with the political winds.

But that hasn't happened, and people are now facing the reality of the loss of their way of life.

"We're taking people who generationally have been taught that they are the heroes in this story and suddenly they don't differentiate between coal is bad and they are bad," said Sasha Nelson, executive director of workforce education and economic development at Colorado Northwestern Community College in Craig. "That is the message that we're sending to some extent and that's a hard one for proud people, for hard-working people, people who struggled, to be receiving. And there's a lot of resistance and pushback."

— Tim Osborn, the power plant manager, estimates that they'll lose another 10 or so workers in 2022.

"I forecasted all the way out to 2029 and we should have about 100 people here — if they're all here in 2029 — that are age 55 and up," Osborn said. □

Major airlines cancel, change flights to US over 5G dispute

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) —

Major international airlines canceled flights heading to the U.S. or changed the planes they're using Wednesday, the latest complication in a dispute over concerns that new 5G mobile phone service could interfere with aircraft technology.

Carriers took widely different approaches to the brewing crisis affecting international travel, from Middle Eastern airline Emirates drastically reducing its U.S.-bound flights to Air France saying it would fly as normal.

It wasn't immediately clear why the airlines made those decisions — or whether they took into account that mobile carriers AT&T and Verizon agreed this week to pause the rollout of the new high-speed wireless service near key airports.

U.S. officials had said that even with the concession, there could be some cancellations and delays because of limitations of equipment on certain planes. Some airlines said Wednesday they received warnings from the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration or Boeing that the plane maker's 777 was particularly affected by the new wireless service.

It was also not clear how disruptive the cancellations would be. Several airlines said they would try to merely use different planes to maintain their schedules.



Similar mobile networks have been deployed in dozens of other countries — but there are some key differences in how the U.S. network works that could make it more likely to cause problems for airlines.

The new 5G network uses a segment of the radio spectrum that is close to that used by radio altimeters, which measure the height of aircraft above the ground and help pilots land in low visibility. The U.S. Federal Communications Commission, which sets a buffer between the frequency that 5G uses and the one that altimeters use, determined that it could be used safely in the vicinity of air traffic.

AT&T and Verizon have said their equipment will not interfere with aircraft electronics.

But FAA officials saw a potential problem, and the telecom companies agreed to a pause Tuesday

while it is addressed.

On Wednesday, Emirates announced it would halt flights to several American cities due to "operational concerns associated with the planned deployment of 5G mobile network services in the U.S. at certain airports." It said it would continue flights to Los Angeles, New York and Washington.

"We are working closely with aircraft manufacturers and the relevant authorities to alleviate operational concerns, and we hope to resume our U.S. services as soon as possible," the state-owned airline said.

Tim Clark, president of Emirates, pulled no punches when discussing the issue. He told CNN it was "one of the most delinquent, utterly irresponsible" situations he'd ever seen as it involved a failure by government, science and industry.

Of particular concern appears to be the Boeing

777. Emirates only flies that model and the Airbus A380 jumbo jet — and it was among one of the most affected airlines.

Japan's All Nippon Airways said that the FAA "has indicated that radio waves from the 5G wireless service may interfere with aircraft altimeters." It added that Boeing announced restrictions on airlines flying its 777s, and said it canceled 20 flights over the issue to cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles and New York.

Japan Airlines similarly said that it had been informed there could be interference with the 777.

It said it will stop using the model in the continental U.S. for now. Eight of its flights were affected Wednesday. Taiwan's EVA Air also said the FAA specifically said 777s may be affected, but it did not spell out how it would adjust its schedule.

But Air France said it

planned to continue flying its 777s into American airports. It did not explain why it didn't change its aircraft as many other carriers have.

In a statement, Chicago-based Boeing Co. said it would work with airlines, the FAA and others to find a solution that would allow all planes to fly safely as 5G is rolled out. It did not respond questions about its 777.

Air India also announced on Twitter it would cancel flights to Chicago, Newark, New York and San Francisco because of the 5G issue. But it also said it would try to use other aircraft on U.S. routes — a course several other airlines took.

Korean Air, Hong Kong's Cathay Pacific and Austrian Airlines said they substituted different planes for flights that were scheduled to use 777s. Korean Air spokeswoman Jill Chung said the airline was also avoiding operating some kinds of 747s at affected airports. Germany's Lufthansa also swapped out one kind of 747 for another on some U.S.-bound flights. British Airways canceled several planned U.S.-bound Boeing 777 flights and changed aircraft on others.

The FAA has said it will allow planes with accurate, reliable altimeters to operate around high-power 5G. But planes with older altimeters will not be allowed to make landings under low-visibility conditions. □

Medical workers fear Polish hospitals can't handle new surge

WARSAW, Poland (AP) —

Doctors and medical workers in Poland fear the country's health care system may not be able to cope with the latest surge of COVID-19 infections.

More than 30,000 new cases in 24 hours were reported Wednesday in this nation of 38 million people and health authorities are expecting the figure to almost double in the next week, reflecting the spread of the highly contagious omicron variant.

Poland has about 31,000 hospital beds for COVID-19 patients, and the current infection rate poses a "great risk to the efficiency of the health care system," Health Minister Adam Niedzielski said.

Medical staff are exhausted and overworked and stress that dedicated hospital beds and equipment alone cannot care for the patients. Nurse Gilbert Kolbe, a spokesman for protesting medics, says "Poland's health care sys-

tem is not prepared for the fifth wave." "Whatever happens during the fifth wave, if no radical steps are taken by our government, will, unfortunately, have influence on the number of deaths," Kolbe told The Associated Press. "It is really a great problem that we are simply exhausted," with people working huge hours every month, Kolbe said, adding that the situation is worsened by the hateful comments and death threats

that some medical workers are receiving.

"Even politicians are saying that the pandemic has saved the medics because it allows them to earn better money!" he said. "But we don't want that money anymore" but want the pandemic to be over.

Milosz Jankowski, the deputy head of the Anesthesiology Clinic at the government hospital in Warsaw, where the most serious COVID-19 cases are treat-

ed, noted the importance of getting vaccinated.

"Perhaps if our society took (the pandemic) more seriously, maybe the authorities would have been more inclined toward more restrictive steps as regards people who are not vaccinated," he said.

The health minister on Wednesday backed a draft regulation that would require workers to show proof of vaccination or recovery from COVID-19 to their employers. □

Russia says it will take nothing less but NATO expansion ban

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia maintained a tough posture Wednesday amid the tensions over its troop buildup near Ukraine, with a top diplomat warning that Moscow will accept nothing less but "watertight" U.S. guarantees precluding NATO's expansion to Ukraine.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, who led the Russian delegation at the security talks with the U.S. in Geneva last week, reaffirmed that Moscow has no intentions of invading Ukraine as the West fears, but said that receiving Western security guarantees is an imperative for Moscow.

The talks in Geneva and a related NATO-Russia meeting in Brussels last week were held as Russia has amassed an estimated 100,000 troops near Ukraine in what the West fears might herald an invasion. Amid the soaring tensions, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Ukraine on Wednesday to reassure it of Western support in the face of what he called "relentless" Russian aggression. In Strasbourg, French President Emmanuel Macron



urged the European Union to quickly draw up a new security plan containing proposals to help ease tensions with Russia.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters Wednesday that talks between Blinken and his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov set for Friday in Geneva are "extremely important."

In a move that further beefs up forces near Ukraine, Russia has sent an unspecified number of troops from the country's far east to its ally

Belarus, which shares a border with Ukraine, for major war games next month. Ukrainian officials have said that Moscow could use Belarusian territory to launch a potential multi-pronged invasion.

The Russian Defense Ministry said Wednesday that some troops already have arrived in Belarus for the Allied Resolve 2022 drills that will run through Feb. 20. It said the exercise will be held at five firing ranges and other areas in Belarus and involve four Belarusian

air bases.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said Wednesday it's too early to tell whether talks could defuse the crisis, adding that "after years of rising tensions, staying silent is not a sensible option."

"The Russian side is aware of our determination," Scholz told the World Economic Forum. "I hope they also realize that the gains of cooperation outweigh the price of further confrontation."

Russia has denied that it intends to attack its neigh-

bor but demanded guarantees from the West that NATO will not expand to Ukraine or other former Soviet nations or place its troops and weapons there. It also has urged NATO to roll back the deployments of its troops and weapons to Central and Eastern European nations that have joined the alliance after the end of the Cold War.

Washington and its allies firmly rejected Moscow's demands but kept the door open to possible further talks on arms control and confidence-building measures to reduce the potential for hostilities.

Ryabkov insisted, however, that there can't be any meaningful talks on those issues if the West doesn't heed the main Russian requests for the non-expansion of NATO. He warned that the Russian demands "constitute a package, and we're not prepared to divide it into different parts, to start processing some of those at expense of standing idle on others."

The Russian diplomat said Ukraine's increasingly close ties with NATO allies pose a major security challenge to Russia. □

Police arrest 29 for bringing people to EU on leisure boats



By COLLEEN BARRY and PAOLO SANTALUCIA Associated Press

FOSSALTA DI PIAVE, Italy (AP) — Police in Italy, Albania and Greece on Wednesday arrested some 30 people accused of profiting several hundred million euros to smuggle refugees and migrants into the European Union from

Turkey on yachts and other leisure vessels.

The coordinated action is believed to have dealt a serious blow to the lucrative Turkey-Europe sailboat crossings, for which people pay between \$6,000 to \$10,000 to reach southern Italy, with an eye on northern European destinations. "We hope to have curbed

the phenomenon, for the next few weeks or the next few months," said Lt. Col. Giuseppe Giulio Leo, head of Italy's financial police in the southern city of Lecce. "Still, we need to take into account that there will be someone ready to join the organization and take over the various roles."

The smugglers use mostly sailboats and yachts, but also fishing boats and less sea-worthy craft, packing between 30 to 180 people on board, he said. Their destination is typically the southern region of Puglia, the closest point, but they often wind up in Calabria due to weather, Leo said. The arrested suspects are believed to be part of a wider ring with as many as 80 members that organized at least 30 smuggling operations that transported at

least 1,100 people by boat from Turkey to the coast of Puglia, and then on to other European countries, EU law enforcement agency Europol said.

Eleven people were arrested in Italy, including smugglers who navigated the vessels, some of which had been stolen, as well as Iraqi and Syrian citizens who carried out the logistics, Leo said. Some had already been taken into custody during the investigation, which was launched more than a year ago.

Another 18 were arrested in Albania and one in Greece, Europol said.

The masterminds of the operations are believed to be in Turkey, and the Lecce prosecutors has activated diplomatic channels in a bid to extend the operation, "with the hope of ap-

prehending the presumed criminals located there," Leo said. Two of the arrested were brothers who are Iraqi citizens accused of running logistics to help the migrants reach northern Europe. The men were arrested without incident near Venice before dawn. Italian financial police entered a modestly furnished house peacefully, and the brothers emerged wearing handcuffs and tracksuits.

The suspects, identified as Alaa Qasim Rahima, 38, and Omar Qasim Rahima, 30, are accused of running a ring that helped bring Syrians from Turkey to the EU using a network of associates in various countries.

Another ringleader, also Iraqi, is accused of helping the smugglers evade detection in Italy and return to Turkey via Greece. □

Mexican abortion advocates look to help women in US

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Decades ago, Mexican activists drove women into the United States to terminate their pregnancies at clinics. Now it's women in the U.S. who are facing more challenges to accessing abortion services and again Mexican activists are stepping up to offer support. The changing dynamic has to do with the reversal of the legal fortunes of abortion rights on both sides of the border and the expertise of Mexican activists in helping women overcome legal and social barriers. In September, Mexico's Supreme Court issued a decision declaring that abortion was not a crime in the heavily Roman Catholic nation. That same month, the most restrictive abortion law in the United States went into effect in Texas. And the U.S. Supreme Court is expected to rule on a case this year that could throw out the 1973 decision guaranteeing women access to abortions, potentially allowing nearly two-dozen states already with laws in place to severely restrict or ban abortion. This week, advocates from both sides of the border plan to develop strategies to circumvent new restrictions and find ways to coordinate assistance for women who want to safely end their pregnancies, including getting abortion pills to women in the U.S. "We want to create networks to put the pills in



the hands of women who need them," especially immigrants and women in vulnerable situations, said Verónica Cruz, director of Las Libres or "The Free," an abortion advocacy group in Mexico. The pills Cruz refers to are misoprostol and mifepristone, a two-drug combination used for medical abortions during the first 12 weeks. Misoprostol, which was used to treat ulcers, doesn't need medical prescription in Mexico and can end a pregnancy alone but is more effective in combination with mifepristone, which does need prescription but the advocate groups get for free from donors. The World Health Organization and International Fed-

eration of Gynecology and Obstetrics endorse their use and they have been widely used for abortions in Europe and other parts of the world. In the United States more than 4 million women have had medical abortions since the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved those drugs in 2000 with a doctor's prescription. The FDA eliminated a 20-year-old requirement in December that women had to pick up the medication in person so now they will be able to get a prescription via an online consultation and receive the pills through the mail. But more than half of U.S. states have local restrictions on medical abortions — such as the need

to have a physician in the same room — that make it complicated or unfeasible to carry out the practice at home. Jacqueline Ayers, vice president of Planned Parenthood, said opponents are using "medically unnecessary restrictions put in place by out-of-touch politicians." Some women living in U.S. border areas have for years crossed to Mexican pharmacies to buy misoprostol, in some cases to avoid the cost of a clinic abortion or simply because it is easier and the drugs are cheaper in Mexico. "I really didn't want to deal with all the restrictions and unnecessary stress that goes along with the abortion in a clinic so I started

looking into the medical abortion options," said Liz Stunz, a graduate student at the University of Texas-El Paso, who ended her pregnancy with a pill from Ciudad Juarez in 2015. Cruz, a lawyer, said advocates will look closely at the new Texas law to ensure that the women and those assisting them are not put in jeopardy. Her group, Las Libres, has been assisting Mexican women with home abortions since 2000, including safely getting the pills to even the most remote locations. They argue that no medical supervision is needed during the first 12 weeks. At that time, abortion was illegal in all of Mexico and Las Libres was known for successfully petitioning courts to free poor and Indigenous women accused of having abortions. Much of the stigma remains, but now it is legal in four states and the September decision by the Supreme Court decriminalizing it has given momentum to efforts to strike it from state penal codes throughout the country. More established groups like Las Libres have trained others in advocacy network, a push that accelerated after Mexico City became the first place to legalize abortion in 2007. At the border, it wasn't necessary for Mexican women to cross to clinics in the United States anymore. □

Nursing home fire kills 6, hospitalizes 17 in eastern Spain

MADRID (AP) — Six residents of a nursing home in eastern Spain died after a fire started by a faulty power strip broke out in the night, authorities said Wednesday. Another 17 residents were hospitalized, with three in serious condition, the regional leader of Valencia, Ximo Puig, said. Firefighters said a total of 70 residents were evacuated from the nursing home in the municipality of Moncada, just north of the city of Valencia.

Firefighter chief José Basset told Spanish news agency EFE that the fire appears to have started in a bedroom on the second floor. "There was a large number of people asking for help who were trapped by the smoke" when firefighters arrived, he said. Spain's Civil Guard police force said its preliminary investigation pointed to a power strip as the source of the fire. "The most important thing now is the recovery of those who have been in-

jured," Puig said. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez tweeted in Spanish that he was following "the tragic news from Moncada. My condolences to the families of the victims. We are watching with concern the evolution of the injured. All our support for the families and the town." Municipal authorities in Moncada have called for three days of mourning, with flags flying at half-staff on the town hall building. Officials called for a min-

ute of silence at noon local time. Spain's nursing homes, like those in many other coun-

tries, were particularly hard-hit during the worst months of the coronavirus pandemic. □




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The reserve requirement rate was increased to 13.0 percent on January 1st, 2022

ORANJESTAD - During its meeting of December 10, 2021, and after reviewing the most recent economic and monetary data, the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Centrale Bank van Aruba (CBA) decided to raise the reserve requirement rate from 12.0 percent to 13.0 percent as of January 1st, 2022. This decision was primarily based on the elevated level of excess liquidity at the commercial banks.

The following information and analysis were considered in reaching this decision:

International reserves

International reserves (including revaluation differences of gold and foreign exchange holdings), up to and including November 19, 2021, increased by Afl. 561.5 million compared to the end of December 2020. The notable expansion in the international reserves was mostly the result of net

inflows of foreign exchange reserves attributed to tourism services and loans from the Government of the Netherlands provided to the Government of Aruba (GoA) to improve its liquidity position. Meanwhile, official reserves increased by Afl. 330.7 million. Consequently, the official and international reserves reached, respectively, Afl. 2,538.6 million and Afl. 2,918.1 as of November 19, 2021 (Graph 1).

Accordingly, the level of reserves remained adequate when benchmarked against the current account payments and the IMF ARA metric (Table 1).

Credit developments

In October 2021, total credit of the banking sector contracted by Afl. 88.9 million or 2.2 percent to Afl. 3,875.2 million, when compared to the end of 2020. This was driven by the categories 'business

loans' (-Afl. 46.9 million/-3.1 percent) and 'loans to individuals' (-Afl. 25.0 million/-1.3 percent). The drop in the category 'loans to individuals' was driven by a decrease in 'consumer credit', while the category 'business loans' was for the most part impacted by less current account loans.

Inflation

In October 2021, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose by 2.4 percent, compared to the corresponding month a year earlier. The twelve-month average inflation rate amounted to -0.3 percent in October 2021, 0.4 percentage point higher than the previous month (Graph 2). The rise in the CPI compared to a year earlier was mainly the result of upward price movements in the components 'transport' and 'household operation'. The former was related to the oil price hike resulting in a higher gasoline price, while the latter was likely due to global supply chain issues.

Commercial bank liquidity

The aggregate excess liquidity of commercial banks rose to Afl. 1,295.8 million in October 2021, compared to Afl. 1,107.4 million in December 2020.

The monthly comparison showed, however, that the aggregated excess liquidity declined from Afl. 1,308.3 million in September 2021 to Afl. 1,295.8 millions in October 2021. This contraction was the result of the expansion of the reserve requirement rate from 9.0 percent to 10.0 percent as of October 1, 2021. The uptick in the reserve requirement rate was, however, mitigated by a surge in the to-

tal liquid funds held by the commercial banks. Consequently, the level of excess liquidity remained high and is significantly above pre-pandemic levels.

The ample excess liquidity is partly the result of the reductions in the reserve requirement rate and the minimum prudential liquidity ratio as of March and April 2020, forming part of the monetary and prudential policy domains relief measures taken by the CBA to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the continued subdued credit demand is an additional contributing factor to the commercial banks' excess liquidity, and likely so were the wage subsidy and FASE programs of the GoA to counteract the economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis.

Consequently, the prudential liquidity ratio of the commercial banks, which measures the percentage of their liquid assets to their total net assets, remained at a comfortable level of 28.4 percent in October 2021, far above the minimum required prudential liquidity ratio of 18.0 percent.

Anticipated outflows due to the de-escalation initiatives by the CBA

Despite the comfortable level of official and international reserves, the CBA anticipates an increase in foreign exchange payments as a result of the lifting, as per September 2021, of the COVID-19 induced foreign exchange restrictions. The latest estimates show an outflow of Afl. 260.0 million by year-end 2021. □

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Tourism recovered 72% in 2021 compared to 2019

ORANJESTAD — On January 17, 2022, the Minister of Tourism Dangui Oduber gave an Aruba tourism update for 2021 compared to 2019.

Compared to 2019, tourism recovered 72% in 2021, making 2021 a pretty good year for tourism. The chart illustrates the number of visitors per month during 2021. One of the important indicators is the tourism receipt. This is the money spent in the local economy by the visitors. The tourism receipt for 2021 surpassed the one of 2019, meaning that we had fewer visitors indeed, but they spent more than those in 2019.

Cruise tourism remains affected by the pandemic. It was not until 2021 that we saw the first Cruise ship in Aruba. This industry started slowly but is gradually moving forward.

In December 2021, 48,209 cruise passengers visited Aruba compared to 126,452 visitors in December 2019. It entails a 61,9% decline in cruise tourism. The number of calls was 35 in December compared to 50 calls in December 2019. In 2021, Aruba received 136,211 cruise ship visitors compared to 832,399 in 2019, which is an 85% decline. In 2021, there were 96 calls compared to the 324 calls in 2019, a drop of 70,4%. The latest reduction in tourism is due to the rapid spread of the Omicron variant. In the first week of 2022, Aruba registered a decrease of 25% to 30% in visitors. Airlines like Frontier Airlines and Air Canada have also suspended their flights to Aruba. There have

also been large-scale cancellations of incentive groups. Originally a 100% recovery was projected for tourism in 2022 compared to 2019. However, due to the current situation, it was adjusted to a projected recovery of 85%. According to the Minister, Omicron was the culprit of the decrease in the outlook, but we still have time to recover from this setback. We can still achieve this by taking the proper steps and calculating risks as we all depend on tourism. □

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Ticket price hike for World Cup final in Qatar reaches 46%

By **ROB HARRIS** AP Global Soccer Writer

The cost of attending the World Cup final is up to 46% higher in Qatar than the previous tournament in Russia, fans discovered Wednesday as tickets went on sale.

The steep rise in the prices for the FIFA showpiece match since 2018 contrasts with the group stage — apart from the opening game — and round of 16 seeing a reduction in the cost of the cheapest tickets, which fans can apply for online.

The most expensive tickets on general sale for the Dec. 18 final at Lusail Stadium are 5,850 Qatari riyals (\$1,607), up 46% from the \$1,100 for the 2018 final won by France.

Category-two tickets are 3,650 Qatari riyals (\$1,003), up 41% from \$710 for the final four years ago. Category-three tickets — the cheapest available for international fans — are 2,200 Qatari riyals (\$604), one-third more expensive than the \$455 last time. The category-four final tickets for local residents soars



from the equivalent of \$110 in Russia to 750 Qatari riyals (\$206).

The cheapest seats on general sale internationally to watch the host nation open the World Cup on Nov. 21 soar 37% to \$302 (1,100 Qatari riyals) from \$220 in Russia. There's a rise of 13% for category-two tickets to \$440 (1,600 Qatari riyals) from \$390 and a similar jump from \$550 in Russia to \$618 (2,250 Qatari riyals) for the most expen-

sive opening-game tickets. For other matches in the group stage, Qatari residents can buy tickets for 40 Qatari riyals (\$11) — the cheapest for locals since the 1986 World Cup in Mexico. The cheapest tickets on international sale are the lowest prices since the 2006 World Cup in Germany at 250 Qatari riyals (\$69). Category-one tickets have risen marginally from \$210 to \$220 (800 Qatari riyals) while the category two will

remain at \$165.

The cheapest tickets in the round of 16 have dropped from \$115 to \$96, but they are rising in the other two categories from \$185 to \$206 and \$245 to \$275. Supporters requesting to attend matches at the Middle East's first World Cup will only discover if they are successful based on a random draw at the conclusion of the first application phase which runs through Feb. 8.

The ticket process is beginning with only 13 of the 32 slots at the tournament filled and qualifying not concluding until the intercontinental playoffs in June. Applications in the first phase of ticket sales can be made on the FIFA website until Feb. 8 with fans notified if they have been successful in the random draw selection by March 8.

The draw for the tournament is scheduled for April 1 in Doha, the capital of the tiny oil-and-gas rich Persian Gulf nation.

As well as applying for tickets for individual games, fans can register to follow their team throughout and to watch four matches in four different stadiums.

FIFA aims to generate \$500 million from hospitality rights and ticket sales from across the eight stadiums in Qatar which are within a 30-mile radius of Doha.

The launch of ticket sales will be the first gauge of interest in attending arguably the most controversial tournament since the World Cup was first staged in 1930. □

Stocks mixed on Wall Street; investors review earnings

By **DAMIAN J. TROISE** AP Business Writer

Stocks turned mixed in afternoon trading on Wall Street as investors review the latest corporate earnings and prepare for higher interest rates.

The S&P 500 rose 0.3% as of 12:47 p.m. Eastern. The Dow Jones Industrial Average rose 42 points, or 0.1%, to 35,411 and the Nasdaq rose 0.6%.

The major indexes bounced between gains and losses throughout the morning, with technology stocks again giving direction to the broader market. The sector has triggered much of the choppiness in the market as investors shift money in expectation of rising interest rates. Higher rates make shares in high-flying tech companies and other expensive growth stocks relatively less attractive.

Microsoft rose 2.7% and Adobe rose 2.6%.

Stocks have slid in January as investors gauge how rising inflation will impact businesses and consumers, along with the Federal Reserve's next move on interest rate policy.

"We've seen some givebacks from the returns we got last year," said Megan Horneman, director of portfolio strategy at Verdenze Capital Advisors. "What we're seeing is that the market is resetting now."

A mix of travel-related companies and automakers fell. Ford slumped 7% following news that it's recalling about 200,000 cars in the U.S. to fix a problem that can stop the brake lights from turning off. Communications companies and makers of household goods and consumer products gained ground. Bond yields fell. The yield on

the 10-year Treasury fell to 1.84% from 1.87% late Tuesday. Investors are busy reviewing the latest round of corporate earnings. Health insurer UnitedHealth Group rose 1.4% after reporting encouraging financial results. Bank of America rose 0.4% after reporting a jump in profits that beat analysts' forecasts.

Household and consumer goods company Procter & Gamble rose 4.2% after also reporting strong financial results. The maker of Dawn dish detergent and other products reported strong results as it passed along higher costs to consumers.

Wall Street is closely watching the latest round of results to gauge whether inflation is cutting into profit margins for companies and to see whether consumers are accepting the higher prices without cutting back

on spending. Demand for goods has outpaced companies' capacity to make and supply products, which has caused supply chain problems and raised raw materials costs.

Economists expect inflation to remain high until those supply chain issues are solved and consumer demand is tempered. Meanwhile, the Federal Reserve is speeding up its withdrawal of support for mar-

kets and the economy. The central bank is likely to raise interest rates earlier and more often than had been expected to fight rising inflation. As of late Tuesday, investors were pricing in a better than 86% probability that the Fed will raise short-term rates at its meeting of policymakers in March. A month ago, they saw less than a 47% chance of that, according to CME Group. □



CROSSWORD

By THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS 45 Small

1 Checkout porch
act 46 Check out

5 Back biter

10 Seasonal song

12 Spanish resort isle

13 Sung story

14 Kuwaiti coin

15 Caterer's pot

16 Shape with a knife

18 Dot

20 Twisty fish

21 Vengeful goddess

23 Place down

24 Methods

26 Defeat

28 Craze

29 Heroic tale

31 Radius setting

32 Petite

36 Easily broken

39 Crayon makeup

40 Turning tool

41 Lorelei's river

43 Come in

44 More rational

DOWN

1 Troop member

2 Blue

Grotto setting

3 "— we all?"

4 Neither follower

5 Calf-length skirt

6 Death notice

7 Door toppers

8 Flowery shrubs

9 Almost never

11 Anarchic

17 That woman

19 Belonging to thee

22 African capital

24 Arrest paper

25 Acknowledged

27 Cereal bit

28 Aesop's output

30 Everybody

33 Baling

34 Bowling spots

35 Use force

37 Vincent's brother

38 Maryland player, for short

42 Derby, e.g.

P	A	G	A	N	S	A	M	P	S
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Yesterday's answer

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10				11		12		
13						14		
15				16	17			
18			19				20	
		21			22		23	
	24	25			26	27		
28			29	30				
31				32		33	34	35
36			37	38			39	
40					41	42		
43					44			
45						46		

AXYDLBAAXR
is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

1-20

CRYPTOQUOTE

IIW MFC SHUN BF K BYHNW.
YN LKXXFB RBNKE WTEP
MFC. KXO YN IR BYNX XF
EFXST K BYHNW. — VHEEHKP
RKTFMKX

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: SECOND IN IMPORTANCE TO HAVING GOOD AIM IS TO RECOGNIZE WHEN TO PULL THE TRIGGER. — ELMER G. LETTERMAN

"The Voice of Holland" talent show hit by #MeToo scandal

AMSTERDAM (AP) — The Dutch talent show "The Voice of Holland" has been taken off the air in the Netherlands amid a sexual misconduct scandal that has cast a shadow over the future of the TV ratings juggernaut in the country where it was first conceived by a media mogul.

The furor is one of the most serious #MeToo reckonings yet to hit the Dutch entertainment world and focuses on a show created in the Netherlands but broadcast in local versions around the globe.

It also draws in a family considered television royalty in the Netherlands — the original creator John de Mol and his sister Linda, a television star in her own right in the Netherlands and Germany who last weekend split from "The Voice of Holland's" pianist and band leader after he admitted having sexual contacts with some contestants.

The Dutch scandal erupted after a local broadcaster's YouTube show called "BOOS" — the Dutch word for angry — contacted "The Voice of Holland" to say it has spoken to victims of "sexually transgressive behavior" on the show and is planning to broadcast a program about their allegations on Thursday.

Prosecutors have received two complaints in recent days against one of the

show's panelists, Dutch rapper Ali Bouali. His lawyer, Bart Swier, said Wednesday that the artist known as Ali B denies any wrongdoing. Swier declined to comment further. The complaints, which Swier said were filed Jan. 11 and on Tuesday, will trigger investigations to establish whether Ali B should face any criminal charges. Even Prime Minister Mark Rutte has weighed in on the scandal swirling around one of the Netherlands' most popular TV shows.

"I think everybody is very shocked and it's good that it is investigated," he told the Dutch daily De Telegraaf.

Dutch broadcaster RTL, which airs "The Voice of Holland," reacted swiftly to the reports, saying over the weekend that it was suspending the show. It called the allegations "very serious and shocking" and said they weren't known to RTL. Dutch media reported Wednesday that RTL had suspended its ties with Ali B as a result of the complaints. The network did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The show's pianist and band leader, Jeroen Rietbergen, quit over the weekend and issued a statement acknowledging his actions.

"During my years of involvement with 'The Voice of Holland,' I had contact of a sexual nature with some

women involved in the program and exchanged sexually tinted WhatsApp messages," he said in a statement to the RTL Boulevard entertainment news show. Rietbergen went on to say that after initially considering the sexual encounters "as reciprocal and equal," he later came to understand that the women "may have experienced this very differently. This insight has made me realize that my behavior has been completely wrong."

His statement also suggested the show's producers had known about his actions and cautioned him in the past. Rietbergen's lawyer didn't immediately respond to a call and email seeking comment.

Rietbergen's partner, Linda de Mol, said in a statement on her website that she split from Rietbergen after the scandal broke and was taking a break from her own television career.

RTL said it contacted the show's producer ITV Studios, which agreed to "immediately initiate a diligent, independent investigation." The Dutch broadcaster said that "Participants, employees, everyone must be able to work in complete safety. There is no room for interpretation in this. The priority now is to get the facts on the table."

ITV Studios said: "Our highest priority is to provide a safe and supportive environment for everyone who participates in — or works on — our shows and ITV Studios has a zero-tolerance policy towards the type of behavior it is said to have taken place."

The company said its investigation aims to "build a complete picture of what happened" and encouraged victims or witnesses to speak to the investigation. Dutch singer Anouk said she was quitting as one of the show's panelists, who first get to know contestants by listening to them "blind" from a swiveling chair facing away from the stage before going on to mentor them. □

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Microsoft's Activision buy could shake up gaming

By **MATT O'BRIEN** and **TALI ARBEL**

AP Technology Writers

Microsoft stunned the gaming industry when it announced this week it would buy game publisher Activision Blizzard for \$68.7 billion, a deal that would immediately make it a larger video-game company than Nintendo.

Microsoft, maker of the Xbox gaming system, said the deal would be good for gamers and advance its ambitions for the metaverse — a vision for creating immersive virtual worlds for both work and play.

But what does the deal really mean for the millions of people who play video games, either on consoles or their phones? And will it actually happen at a time of increased government scrutiny over giant mergers in the U.S. and elsewhere?

SO, IS IT GOOD FOR GAMERS?

"For the average person who is playing Candy Crush or anything else, there will probably be no changes at all," said RBC analyst Rishi Jaluria.

But Jaluria and industry watchers think it could be good news for game development more broadly, especially if Microsoft's games-for-everybody mission and mountain of cash can rescue Activision from its reputation for abandon-



ing favorite game franchises while focusing on a few choice properties.

"Microsoft wants to increase the variety of intellectual property," said Forrester analyst Will McKeon-White. "Their target is anyone and everybody who plays video games and they want to bring that to a wider audience."

He said the "most egregious" example of a popular franchise that Activision, founded in 1979, left by the wayside is Starcraft, last updated in 2015. Others include Guitar Hero, the Tony Hawk skateboarding games and MechWarrior, which McKeon-White said "basically wasn't touched

for two decades."

On the other hand, the prospect of a console-maker like Microsoft controlling so much game content raised concerns about whether the company could restrict Activision games from competitors.

Microsoft expects to bring as many Activision games as it can to its subscription service Game Pass, "with some presumably becoming Microsoft exclusives," wrote Wedbush analyst Michael Pachter. However, he noted antitrust regulators may not allow Microsoft to keep games off Sony's competing game console, the PlayStation.

Pachter said that Activision

presents a model for Microsoft for how to evolve its classic console franchises. It has adapted Call of Duty into successful mobile and free games, and he expects the company to help Microsoft do the same with Xbox-owned Halo and other games.

IS THIS REALLY ABOUT THE METAVERSE?

Microsoft says so. And there are some ways Activision could help the tech giant compete with rivals like Meta, which renamed itself from Facebook last year to signal its new focus on leading its billions of social media users into the metaverse.

Metaverse enthusiasts de-

scribe the concept as a new and more immersive version of the internet, but to work it will require a lot of people to actually want to spend more time in virtual worlds. Microsoft's metaverse ambitions have so far been focused on work tools such as its Teams video chat service, but online multiplayer games such as Call of Duty and World of Warcraft have huge followings devoted to interacting with each other virtually for fun. "That's where Activision really helps," said RBC's Jaluria. "Millions of people play Call of Duty online. The community element helps drive adoption."

WILL IT ACTUALLY HAPPEN?

That's a big unknown. Regulators and rivals could turn up the pressure to block the deal.

Other tech giants such as Meta, Google, Amazon and Apple have all attracted increasing attention from antitrust regulators in the U.S. and Europe. But the Activision deal is so big — potentially the priciest-ever tech acquisition — that Microsoft will also be putting itself into the regulatory spotlight. Microsoft is already facing delays in its planned \$16 billion acquisition of Massachusetts speech recognition company Nuance because of an investigation by British antitrust regulators. □

Construction to begin soon on new US offshore wind farm

By **JENNIFER McDERMOTT**
Associated Press

Construction will soon begin on the second commercial-scale, offshore wind energy project to gain approval in the United States, the developers said. The U.S. Department of the Interior approved it in November, and the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management issued its approval letter for the construction and operations plan Tuesday, a major step in the federal process before construction can start.

Orsted, a Danish energy company, is developing the South Fork Wind project with utility Eversource off

the coasts of New York and Rhode Island. They now expect the work onshore to begin by early February and offshore next year for as many as 12 turbines.

President Joe Biden has set a goal to install 30 gigawatts of offshore wind power by 2030, generating enough electricity to power more than 10 million homes. In November, work began on the first commercial-scale offshore wind farm in the United States, the Vineyard Wind 1 project off the coast of Massachusetts.

Those developments, along with last week's announcement that the Biden administration will hold its first

offshore wind auction next month, show there's a lot of excitement, energy and progress in the U.S. offshore wind industry, said David Hardy, CEO of Orsted Offshore North America.

The auction is for nearly 500,000 acres off the coast of New York and New Jersey for wind energy projects that could produce enough electricity to power nearly 2 million homes.

"There's a lot of activity, at the same time it's still a nascent industry," Hardy said Tuesday. "So there are still a lot of unknowns and a lot of risk, quite frankly, to getting this started and getting it right and in achieving the

full opportunities of the industry."

The offshore wind industry is far more advanced in Europe, where the first offshore wind farm opened in 1991, Hardy added.

"We're jumping in and leveraging what they've started," he said. "And I like to say that we don't plan to play catch up for long. We may be behind for awhile on the volume, but we can bring U.S. innovation and U.S. technology to this industry, and hopefully be able to export that in the relatively near term."

Eversource President and CEO Joe Nolan said the introduction of the offshore

wind supply chain in the United States will create jobs, revitalize dormant ports and displace fossil fuels by providing a clean, carbon-free energy source. The first U.S. offshore wind farm opened off Rhode Island's Block Island in late 2016. But at five turbines, it's not commercial scale. Orsted acquired the developer, Rhode Island-based Deepwater Wind, and now operates that wind farm. Some commercial fishing groups have complained that wind projects off the East Coast could interfere with efforts to catch seafood species such as scallops, clams and sea bass. □

Hedman, Kucherov propel streaking Lightning past Kings 6-4

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Victor Hedman and the Tampa Bay Lightning found a novel way to break up the monotony that can be the middle of the NHL regular season.

Hedman had two goals and an assist in Tuesday night's 6-4 victory over the Los Angeles Kings despite being one of only four Tampa Bay defensemen who dressed after three were scratched due to injuries.

The 2018 Norris Trophy winner, who has been a finalist for the NHL's top defenseman award five straight seasons, said he had trouble napping before the game because it was going to be challenging.

"It was something new. You knew you were going to be out there every other shift," Hedman said. "In an 82-game season, you need those challenges. It was fun to see what you could do with only four guys."

"You can look at it and feel sorry for yourself or look at it as an opportunity. We tried to keep it as simple as possible and got a big two points."

Hedman saw 32:37 of ice time, his most in a regular-season game that has not gone to overtime. He also extended his point streak to four games (one goal,



five assists) as the two-time defending Stanley Cup champions pushed their winning streak to four.

"He just thrives when he is asked to do more. He gave a phenomenal performance to help the win," fellow defenseman Ryan McDonagh said.

Hedman scored his first goal since Dec. 16 at 13:17 of the first period when he retrieved an errant pass in the Kings zone and beat Cal Petersen glove side on a breakaway.

Hedman then scored the go-ahead goal at 10:43 of the third when he took Nikita Kucherov's pass and

scored on a snap shot to give the Lightning a 4-3 lead. It was the ninth multi-goal game of Hedman's career, and one of three third-period goals by Tampa Bay that put the game away.

"I think he's one of the top five players in the National Hockey League, not just tonight but every night I turn on the TV," Kings coach Todd McClellan said. "Six-foot-six and play like that, and he had a huge impact on the game. Played the most minutes of anybody and played the best out of everybody."

Kucherov extended his

scoring tear with a power-play goal in the second period along with an assist. The right wing, who missed 32 games with a lower-body injury that required surgery, has 11 points (four goals, seven assists) in six games since returning to the lineup.

Mathieu Joseph and Steven Stamkos also had a goal and an assist apiece for the Lightning, who have a 10-game winning streak over the Kings. Pierre-Edouard Bellemare also scored and Andrei Vasilevskiy stopped 32 shots.

"The big thing for us is we couldn't turn it over. It was

pivotal in the second period to get pucks deep so we could get our defensemen off," Lightning coach Jon Cooper said.

Blake Lizotte, Alex Iafallo, Arthur Kaliyev and Philip Danault scored for the Kings, who have dropped two straight after a four-game winning streak. Petersen made 19 saves.

"That's kind of what we expected was gonna happen, a kind of back-and-forth kind of game," Iafallo said. "But when that happens, you've just got to kind of pack it in and take your chances and get better chances. But we'll have to regroup and we'll be fine."

NIFTY GOAL

Lizotte tied it 1-all at 8:52 of the second when he got the puck from Brayden Point in the corner, skated in and went top shelf on Vasilevskiy.

SPECIAL TEAMS FLURRY

Each team had a short-handed and power-play goal in a span of less than 4 1/2 minutes during the second period.

Iafallo got his first career short-handed goal at 11:44 when he took advantage of a turnover near Tampa Bay's net. The Lightning tied it, though, at 13:03 on Kucherov's one-timer from the right circle. □

Postponements farce sees EPL explore tightening of rules

By ROB HARRIS

AP Global Soccer Writer

When Arsenal this week sent Pablo Mari away on loan and released Sead Kolasinac, trimming the squad looked perplexing for a club already struggling to muster a team to play.

Folarin Balogun and Ainsley Maitland-Niles had only just been loaned out when Arsenal told the Premier League it lacked enough players to host Tottenham last Sunday.

Calling off a game wasn't unusual for England's top division. Applying coronavirus regulations has seen 22 postponements since last month as the spread of the omicron variant has depleted squads and shut

training facilities.

But when the request to postpone the north London derby against Tottenham went to the league on Friday, Arsenal had only one declared coronavirus case in the squad. Instead, with five players at the African Cup of Nations and injury absentees, Arsenal successfully convinced the league to call off its game against Tottenham in a stretching of the pandemic policies not intended for this scenario.

"The decision to postpone the game was very, very strange," Tottenham manager Antonio Conte said, with a few days to reflect on his frustration. "We have a big problem to solve and it's COVID, but only about

this situation can you decide to postpone, not for other situations.

"Honestly, it's my first time in my life — and I've had a bit of experience in football — to see postponed games because of injuries."

Regulations state a game must go ahead if a club has 13 fit outfield players plus a goalkeeper. But confusion over the application of the rules has created a growing sense of farce. The league hasn't said why Arsenal wasn't told to promote less experienced contracted players into the first team, with the under-23s playing on Friday night. Nor has the league addressed if Arsenal missing Granit Xhaka was a factor in the postponement after


he was suspended following his sending off against Liverpool in the League Cup.

But the exasperation within rival clubs at how games are being called off has led to the league deciding to speak to them about changing the criteria. The league, which needs 14 of the 20 clubs to approve altering regulations, said coronavirus cases dropping across clubs for three consecutive weeks sparked the consultation.

"The league's current guidance was amended in December following the emergence of the new Omicron variant," the league said in a statement on Wednesday, "and we continue to monitor the ongoing ef-

fects of the virus and will update our guidance accordingly."

At least the Premier League doesn't make teams go through the spectacle — as endured in Italy's Serie A — of making them turn up to the stadium with no opposition to face. But the raft of postponements has created a distorted league standings in England. Leader Manchester City has played 22 games and last-place Burnley has only contested 17 of the 38 fixtures after Tuesday's rescheduled game against Watford was postponed again. Burnley manager Sean Dyche said he had 10 outfield players able to train at the time but didn't talk about promoting younger players. □



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Beijing residents disappointed Olympics will be closed event

BEIJING (AP) — With just over two weeks before the opening of the Beijing Winter Olympics, residents of the Chinese capital say they're disappointed at not being able to attend events because of coronavirus restrictions that have seen parts of the city placed under lockdown. Organizers announced Monday that no tickets will be sold to the general public and only selected spectators will be allowed. Access to the famed National Stadium, known as the Bird's Nest, and indoor venues in the heart of Beijing have been sealed off. People interviewed Wednesday appeared understanding of the restrictions. Many of them could be seen skating on Beijing's frozen lakes in a sign of continuing enthusiasm for winter sports.

Because China allows no public protests or opinion polling and tightly restricts free speech, any opposition to the Games or the restrictions would be muted. Chen Lin had planned to buy tickets for speed skating, but gave up over personal concerns about the pandemic and after it became clear that tickets would only be offered to selected spectators.

"I went to the Beijing Summer Olympic Games in 2008. It's a pity that I won't be able to watch the Games this time during the Winter



Olympics," the 38-year-old said. "Of course, we can still watch the Games with live broadcast on TV and live streaming online, but it doesn't provide as strong a sense of engagement as watching the Games on the spot."

Beijing is the first city to be awarded the right to host both the Summer and Winter Games.

Chen said the level of excitement this year was far below that of 2008, when the Games brought an outpouring of national pride.

"On the one hand, the Winter Olympics don't get as much attention as the Summer Olympics. On the other hand, there is also the pandemic. Both of them are

the reasons," he said.

Retiree and amateur photographer Wang Shaolan, who volunteered at the 2008 Games, said she had been hoping to take her camera along to events in order to "be part of this."

"But now with the closed-loop management, we won't be able to be there ourselves. That's a pity," Wang said, referring to the restrictions separating participants from the general population.

The recent appearance of the more contagious omicron variant of the coronavirus in Beijing has heightened concerns about outbreaks, although the capital reported just one new case Wednesday.

Elsewhere in the country, around 20 million people are under some form of lockdown and mass testing has been ordered in entire cities where cases have been discovered.

China has largely avoided major outbreaks with lockdowns, mass testing and travel restrictions, although it continues to fight surges in several cities, including the port of Tianjin, about an hour from Beijing.

Restrictions were also tightened in the Henan province city of Anyang south of Beijing, where an additional 29 cases of local transmission were reported Wednesday, out of a national total of 55.

Games organizers have already announced that no fans from outside the country will be allowed.

The Olympics begin Feb. 4, just days after the start of Lunar New Year celebrations. Athletes, officials, staff and journalists are required to enter an anti-pandemic bubble without outside

contact and undergo daily testing.

As an additional precaution, Beijing will require travelers to take nucleic acid tests within 72 hours of entering the city starting Jan. 22. Schools in Beijing have also closed early and moved classes online ahead of the winter holidays. Along with coronavirus worries, the Games have been beset by political controversies, including a decision by the U.S. and its close allies not to send dignitaries in protest over China's treatment of its Muslim Uyghur minority and other human rights abuses. On Tuesday, athletes were urged by human rights activists to avoid criticizing China because they could be prosecuted.

The International Olympic Committee has said athletes will have freedom of speech when speaking to journalists or posting on social media. However, the Olympic Charter rule that prohibits political protests at medal ceremonies also requires "applicable public law" to be followed.

The IOC has not responded to requests in recent days to clarify how Chinese law could apply at the Games. Asked about the free speech issues at the Olympics, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said Wednesday that China understood the IOC banned athletes from political protests.

"I would like to reiterate that China welcomes athletes from all countries to participate in the Beijing Winter Olympic Games and will ensure their safety and convenience," Zhao told reporters at a daily briefing. □



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